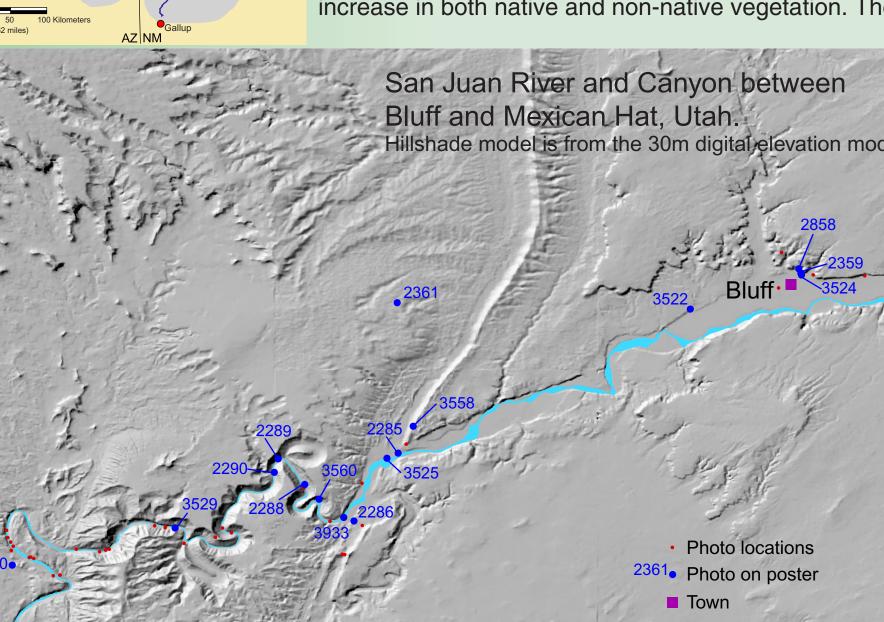
CHANGES IN RIPARIAN VEGETATION IN THE SOUTHWESTERN UNITED STATES: Floods and Riparian Vegetation on the San Juan River, Southeastern Utah

INTRODUCTION

the Four Corners Region upstream from Mexican Hat, Utah, and has its headwaters in the San



San Juan River near B Utah (the gaging station the largest floods on the

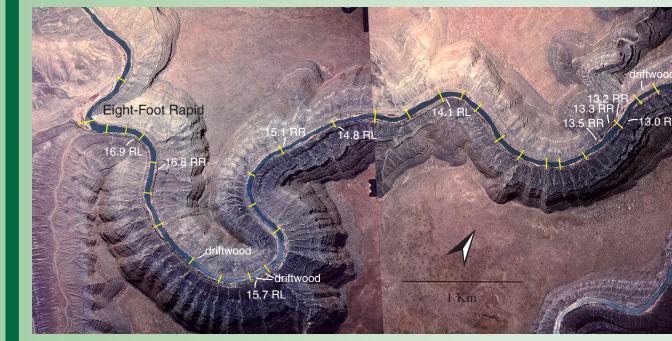
of this flood was about 10 m (31 ft). After 1962 and through 2001, the largest flood on the San Juan River was 1,090 m³/s (38,500 ft³/s) caused by Tropical Storm Norma on September 6, 1970 (Roeske et al., 1978). Most of the runoff generated by this storm was downstream from Navajo Reservoir.

Several floods before the start of the gaging record in 1914 were larger and more damaging than the 1927 flood.

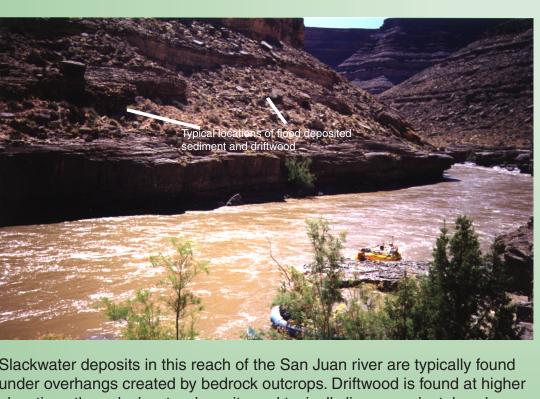
San Juan River near Bluff, Utah 1911 Flood (this study) Floods Before Navajo Reservoir Floods After Navajo Reservoir × Floods in Gaging Record 1911 Flood

The largest floods result from rainfall in August-October.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12



Aerial photographs of the study reach, including the location of the surveyed cross sections large flood. vellow bars), Eight-Foot Rapid, and the location of prominent slackwater and driftwood deposits (white text). Flow is from right to left.



Slackwater deposits in this reach of the San Juan river are typically found under overhangs created by bedrock outcrops. Driftwood is found at higher elevations than slackwater deposits and typically lies on rocky talus slopes exposed to weathering.

Published accounts document two extremely large floods in 1909 and 1911. The 1909 flood occurred in early September and was attributed to heavy and continuous rains in the San Juan's headwaters. Long-time residents of nearby Farmington, New Mexico, stated that the flood was the largest since the settlement of the area in 1880 (Freeman, 1909). A larger flood peaked on October 6, 1911, after a week of heavy rains (Brandenberg, 1911). This flood destroyed most of the bridges on the mainstem San Juan River, including the first Goodridge bridge at Mexican Hat. That bridge was 12 m (39 ft) above the river. LaRue (1925) reported that this flood had a discharge of 4,250 m³/s (150,000 ft³/s), but provided no supporting documentation.

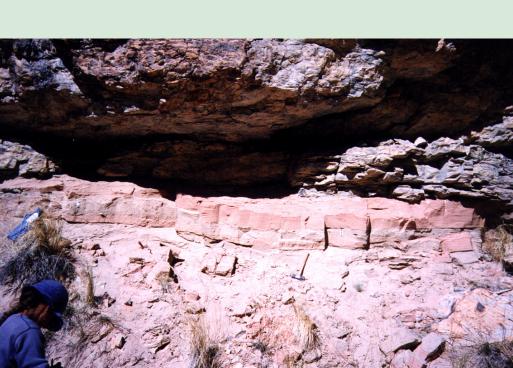
EVIDENCE OF PAST FLOODS

Paleoflood hydrology involves the reconstruction of the dates and discharges of past floods, including historical events not recorded at aging stations. The San Juan Canyon upstream from Mexican Hat ains an extraordinary amount of slackwater-deposit, paleostagendicator (SWD-PSI) evidence that allows estimation of the discharges of past floods (Orchard, 2001). As the river flows west between Bluff and Mexican Hat, Utah, it cuts perpendicularly through a series of uplifted monoclines and anticlines in Paleozoic rocks and becomes entrenched deep in the limestones of the Honaker Trail and Paradox Formations. The resistant limestones form a narrow, deep canyon with numerous bedrock overhangs that preserve sediment deposited by large floods. A nearly continuous series of slackwater deposits and driftwood lines deposited 8-14 m (26-45 ft) above the channel are present within the 8 km (5 mi) reach (river mile 13 to 18). Stratigraphic sequences were described at 11 sites, and paleostage indicators such as driftwood lines have been described at several other sites (Orchard, 2001). Each stratigraphic section contains evidence of 3-5 floods, but as many as 10 flood deposits are present in some sections. The discovery of human-

made structures and artifacts buried the highest under flood deposits suggests that these floods are all historic. The presence of non-nativ plant materials in the sediments further underscores

> hroughout the study reach, well-preserved driftwood nes are sometimes continuous for over 1 km (0.6 mi). ese driftwood lines contain historic artifacts, such a awn wood, metal cans, and nails. Some of the nails have round heads, suggesting they were manufactured after 1900. These high driftwood lines greatly exceed the expected elevations of any measured discharge recorded in the gaging record, and we attribute them to the October 1911 flood. The continuous driftwood lines provide a record of the water-surface slope during this

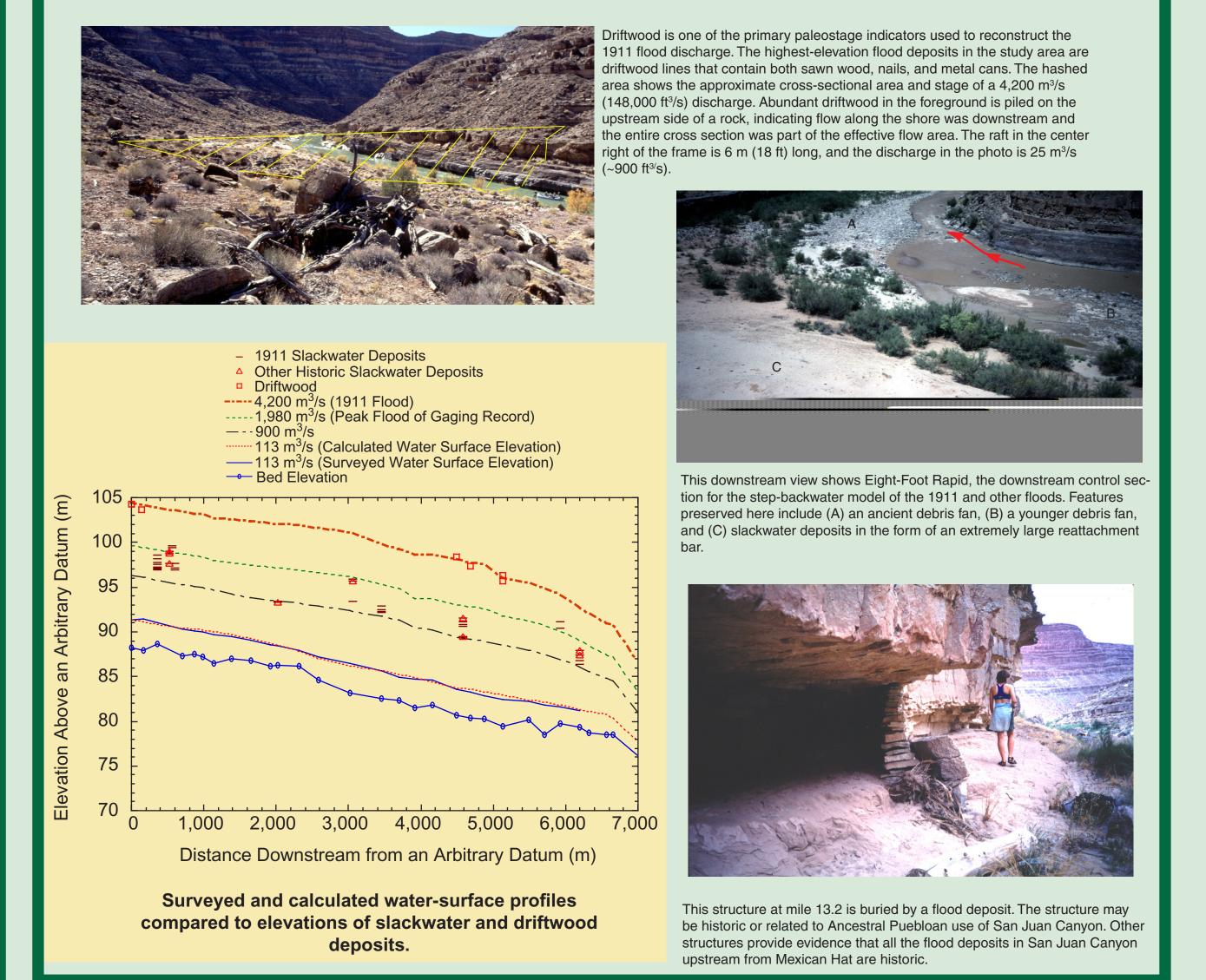
nat all flood deposits are historic (Orchard, 2001).



neath a bedrock overhang. This particular deposit is at river mile 15.1 on river right and contains 6 flood units.

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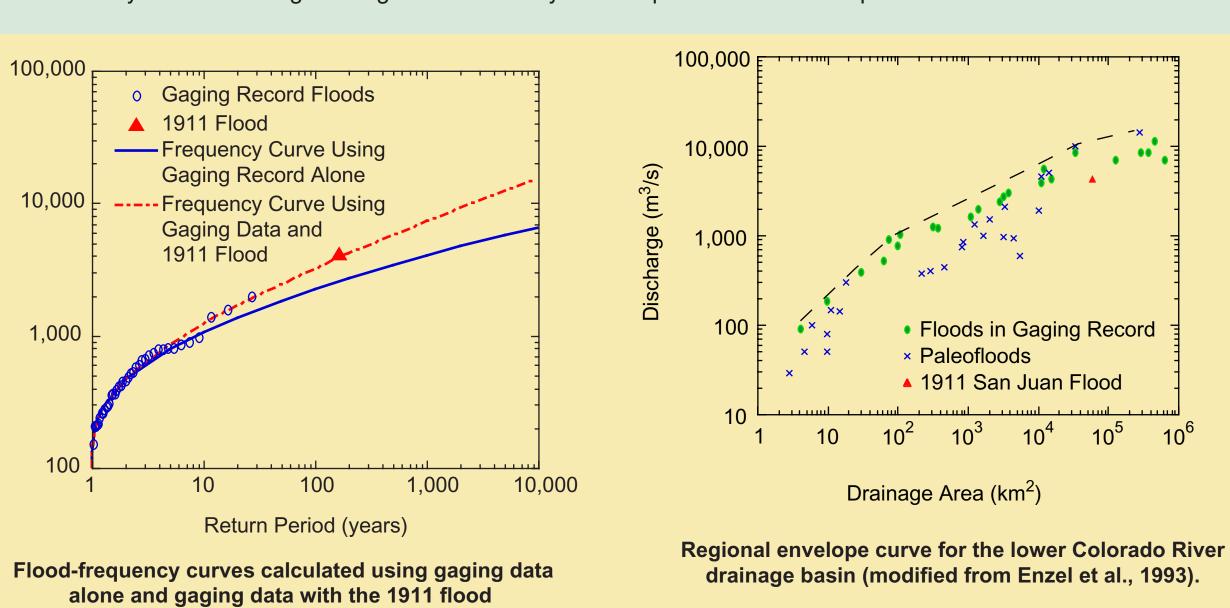
DISCHARGE ESTIMATES



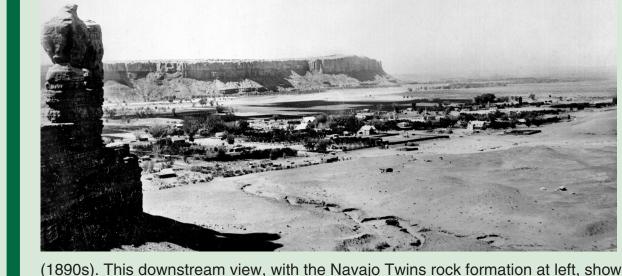
FLOOD FREQUENCY

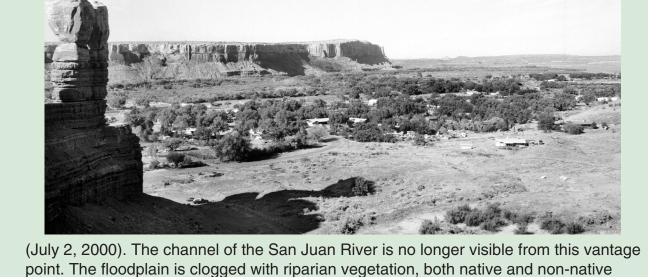
efficient method of moments procedure based on type II censoring (Cohn et al., 1997). The 1911 flood was considered as the largest between 1880 and 2001. Based on our analysis, the 1911 flood has an estimated recurrence interval of about 150 years. Including the 1911 flood in the frequency analysis increased the estimate of the 100-year flood by 44% from 2,240 m³/s (gaging data alone) to 3,210 m³/s (79,100 to 113,000 ft³/s respectively). To verify the reasonableness of the discharge of the 1911 flood, we plotted its value on the regional envelope curve for the Colorado River drainage (Enzel et al., 1993), with the result that the discharge plotted well below the enveloping curve.

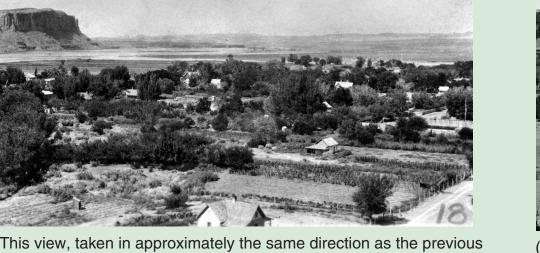
The 1911 flood was not only the largest flood during the historic period, it is the largest flood that has left preserved evidence in the San Juan Canvon. No flood evidence was observed at elevations higher than the historic driftwood line deposited by the 1911 flood despite conditions ideal for the preservation of flood deposits. All flood deposits at elevations lower than the 1911 driftwood line contained evidence that indicated they were historic. This suggests that the 1911 flood may have been large enough to remove any flood deposits that were emplaced before 1911.



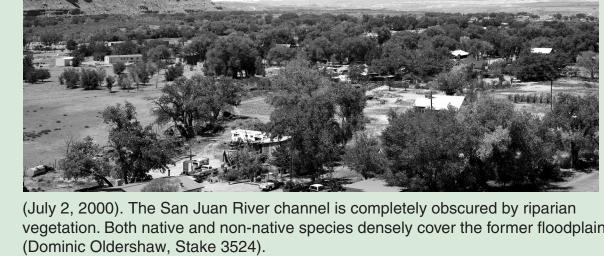
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one but upstream from the Navajo Twins, shows that the channel of the San Juan River was free of riparian vegetation in 1921. The trees in Bluff are taller than in 1890, and the town appears to be considerably larger (Robert N. Allen 18, courtesy



and agricultural fields continue to be tilled in this area. The channel of the San Juan is trees. Note that the former islands appear to have denser riparian vegetation than the ormerly barren areas (Dominic Oldershaw, Stake 2359a).

(March 23, 1998). The view is now blocked by riparian vegetation, including non-

native tamarisk (taller trees) and native rabbitbrush (*Chrysothamnus nauseosus*;

white flower heads). The cottonwood trees, leafless in March, appear in the right

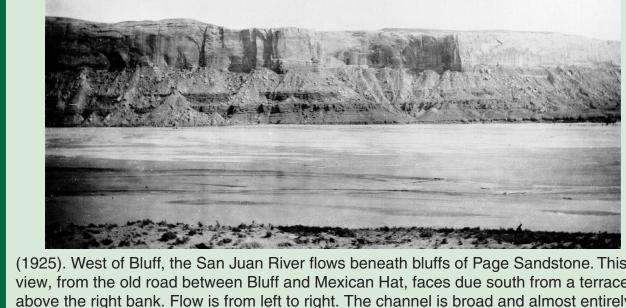
midground. The cottonwoods in the original view are no longer present, but new

cottonwoods are in approximately same location (Robert H. Webb, Stake 3525).

of the main river channel. Both native and non-native riparian vegetation have increased; coyote willow generally is the shrub closest to the river channel, with

terraces to the river on both sides (Dominic Oldershaw, Stake 2285).

Russian olive and tamarisk just behind. Cottonwood trees are present on the closest



ut angled across the San Juan River, shows the channel beyond cultivated

pricultural fields. Broad islands vegetated with low-statured riparian vegetation

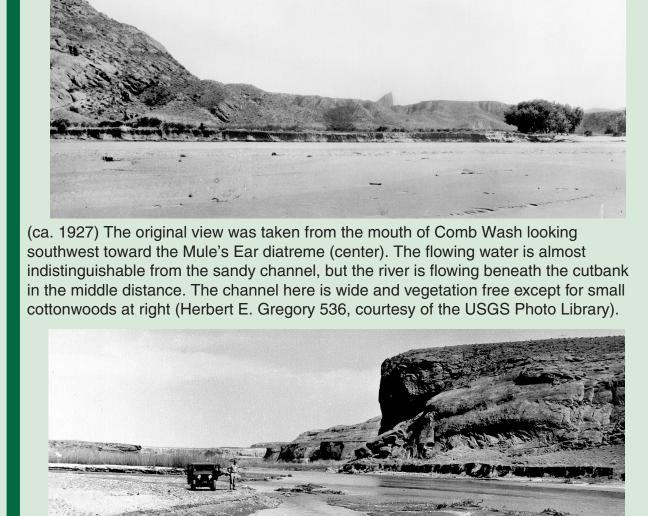
probably cottonwoods, are visible across the channel in the center. This photograph

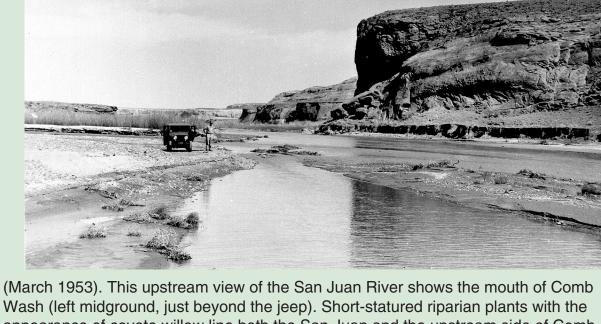
appear in the channel at both the left and right sides of the view. Scattered trees

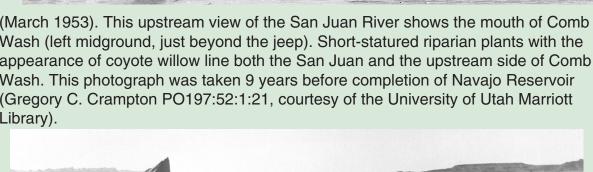
was taken just before the 1909 flood (Stuart Malcolm Young NAU.PH.643.1.2)

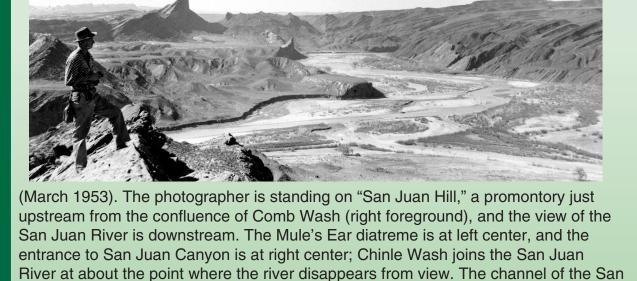
courtesy of Northern Arizona University Cline Library).











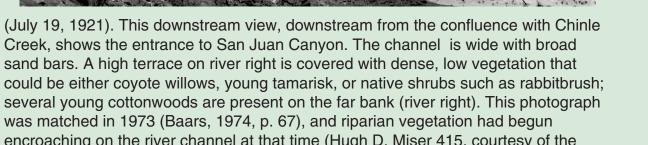
cottonwood appears at lower center (Gregory C. Crampton PO197:52:1:36, courtesy of

Iniversity of Utah Marriott Library).

(March 23, 1998). The channel of both the San Juan River and Chinle Wash have narrowed considerably. In this reach, the channel of the San Juan is divided through a series of islands densely covered with riparian vegetation. Cottonwood trees are difficult to identify in this late-winter view, but they are present along most of the channel, particularly along river right (Dominic Oldershaw, Stake 3558). cross the river in the center of the photograph and low cutbanks and floodplains. w-statured riparian vegetation is becoming established along both drainages; a lone

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and the San Juan River, shows the small boats of a commercial river trip. The river (Bill Belknap NAU.PH.96.4.318.8, courtesy of the Northern Arizona University Cline

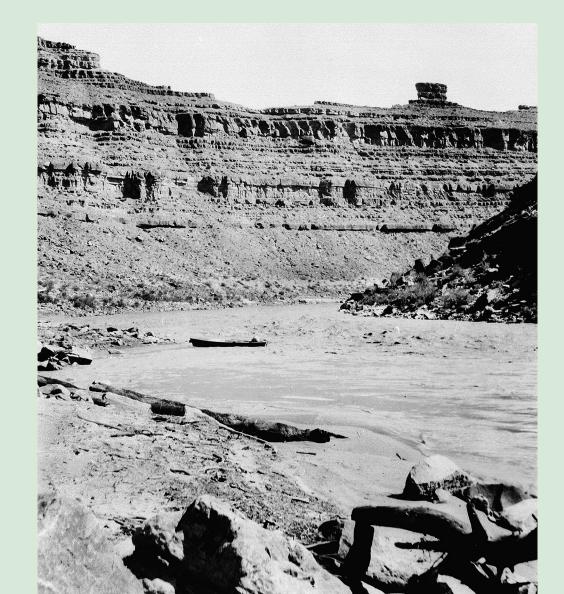




since the 1985 photograph. Much of the increase is in non-native tamarisk, but cottonwood trees on both sides of the river have also increased in size. The gravel bar exposed on river left (right center) is not new but merely exposed in the low discharge of 23 m³/s (822 ft³/s) of this view (Dominic Oldershaw, Stake 3933).



Juan River about 3 km (2 mi) downstream from the entrance to the canyon to document a potential damsite. This upstream view, which is the left center cropped from LaRue's wider view, shows the dam hand drawn on the photograph. Very little riparian vegetation is present in this reach, and the pointbar across the river appears scoured (Eugene C. LaRue 827, courtesy of the USGS Photo Library).



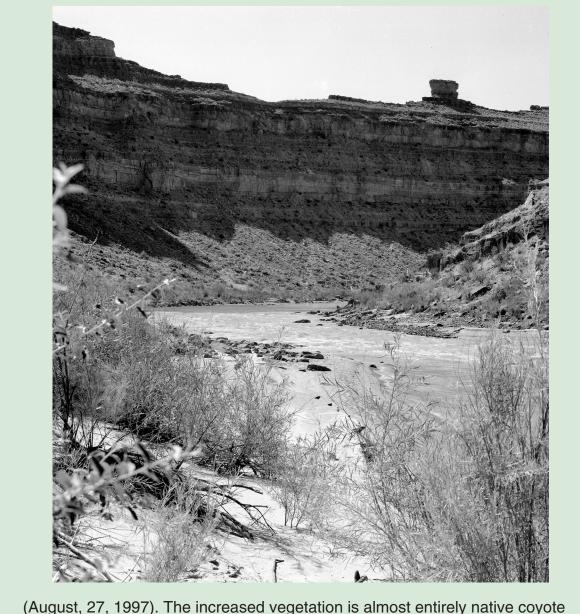
this upstream view of 4-Foot Rapid. Very little riparian vegetation is visible, and what is present are low-statured shrubs. A clear high-water mark appears in the middle distance, probably as a result of the 1911 and other floods (Hugh D. Miser 418, courtesy of the USGS Photo Library).



Juan appears in this upstream view from the start of our study reach. Scattered stands hackberry (Celtis reticulata), a small, native tree. This view does not show a significant change in density or cover of riparian vegetation in comparison with other photographs taken between 1875 and 1921 (Phillip W. Tompkins PO341:7:14:5, courtesy of the University of Utah Marriott Library).



pourovers marks the first rapid of note in San Juan Canyon. The formerly denuded point bar is covered with riparian vegetation, much of which is non-native tamarisk (Dominic Oldershaw, Stake 3560a).

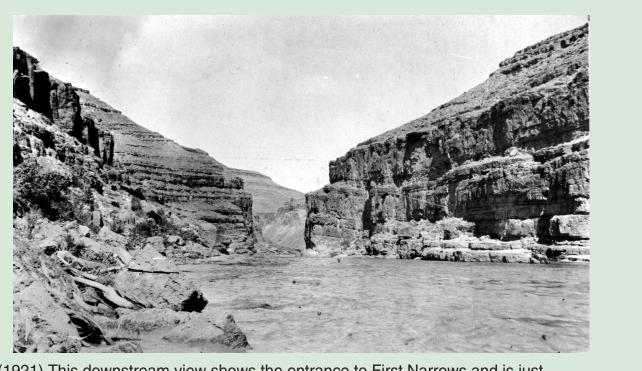


willow, but a distinctive branch of a solitary Russian olive appears at the left. Tamarisk has become established on both sides of the channel in the middle distance. Despite the substantial channel narrowing several miles upstream, the channel has not narrowed appreciably here, and the increase in riparian vegetation is not as large as in the alluvial reaches between Bluff and the entrance to the canyon. The light high-water mark has faded, obscured by desert vegetation (Dominic Oldershaw, Stake 2288).

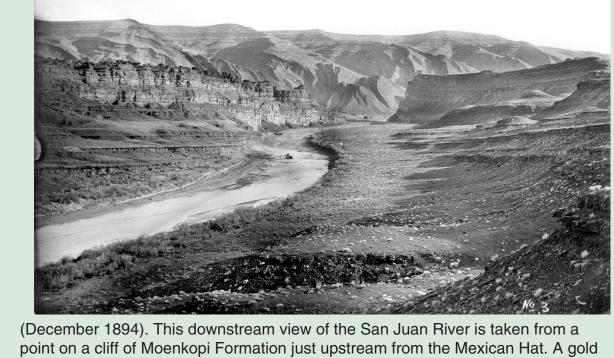


(August 27, 1997). Riparian vegetation has increased greatly, particularly on the point bar at right center. Tamarisk has increased the most, although native species such as coyote willow are also present. A lone juniper appears under the cliff upslope from the point bar (Dominic Oldershaw, Stake 2289).





Narrows. The scattered riparian vegetation (left side) appears to be mostly netleaf ackberry trees (Robert N. Allen 27, courtesy of the Dan O'Laurie Museum).



me indicate that the riparian vegetation on the terraces (both sides of the river) are ative covote willow, leafless in winter (Charles Goodman PO068:78, courtesy of the niversity of Utah Marriott Library).



tamarisk just visible behind the willows. Beaver had culled some of the willows

from the sandbar shortly before our visit (Robert H. Webb, Stake 3529).

river, resulting in significant channel narrowing. This reach is only partly bedrock controlled and has responded similarly to the reach from Bluff to the head of the canyon, both in terms of increases of riparian vegetation and channel narrowing. The vegetation consists of native coyote willow closest to the river channel and on the point bar in the middle distance where the dredge once was; a band of dense tamarisk occurs behind the willows. The floodplain consists of a mixture of native shrubs and smaller tamarisk (Dominic Oldershaw, Stake 1790).

CONCLUSIONS

The largest historic flood in the San Juan River occurred on October 6, 1911, with a discharge of 4,200 m³/s (148,000 ft³/s) and a recurrence interval of about 150 years. This flood appears to have removed all older flood evidence from San Juan Canyon below its peak stage. No flood evidence was found higher than the 1911 flood deposits despite ideal settings for preservation, suggesting that the 1911 flood may represent the largest flood on the San Juan River for a much longer time period than 1880-2001. Wide, vegetation-free channel conditions existed before the 1911 flood and afterwards until the last half of the 20th century, suggesting that this flood alone did not significantly affect the distribution of riparian communities. Channel narrowing occurred after 1941, as it has on other rivers in the region. Native and non-native riparian vegetation have encroached on the previously wide channel in the alluvial reach and in previously barren parts of the bedrock canyon. The increase in riparian vegetation has accelerated in recent decades. Changes in flood frequency and riparian vegetation are affected both by climatic fluctuations and flow regulation. The increase in riparian vegetation, particularly in the last 30 years, is associated with a regional increase in precipitation, particularly during winter. Unlike other rivers, winter floods have not increased, in part because of the operation of Navajo Reservoir. Construction of Navajo Dam and Reservoir has affected the San Juan River in complex ways that are not fully addressed in this study, including the attenuation of flood peaks caused by storms at higher elevations in the basin, storage of sediment generated in the higher elevations of the basin, and changes in seasonal flow patterns, all of which could have influenced the increase in riparian vegetation. Because flood waters mostly are generated at the higher elevations and sediment mostly is generated at lower elevations in the drainage, the channel narrowing is consistent with a river with decreased flow competence, or ability to transport sediment, but with a continued high sediment yield from its tributaries.

Acknowledgments. We offer special thanks to the River Office staff of the Monticello Field Office, Bureau of Land Management. Dominic Oldershaw matched many of the photographs. Peter Griffiths and Jessica Young helped with the illustrations. Additional thanks to the many field assistants who endured freezing rain, blistering heat, flash floods, and all of the other joys of working in such a beautiful canyon.

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